# New York Theatre Critics' Reviews 1947

Volume VIII, Number 19 • Rachel W. Coffin, *Editor* • Week of November 24, 1947

## 1947 PRODUCTIONS

Premieres in Other Years

*Original Reviews Appeared in These Volumes*

### 1946 Vol.


| *Stage Play* | *Page* |
|---|---|
| Androcles and the Lion | 217 |
| *Annie Get Your Gun | 382 |
| Another Part of the Forest | 247 |
| Beggar's Holiday | 204 |
| *Born Yesterday | 466 |
| *Burlesque | 208 |
| *Call Me Mister | 403 |
| Christopher Blake | 233 |
| Cyrano de Bergerac | 321 |
| Fatal Weakness (The) | 251 |
| *Happy Birthday | 280 |
| Henry VIII | 271 |
| Iceman Cometh (The) | 315 |
| Joan of Lorraine | 255 |
| John Gabriel Borkman | 263 |
| Lady Windermere's Fan | 307 |
| Lovely Me | 211 |
| Made In Heaven | 292 |
| O Mistress Mine | 474 |
| Park Avenue | 275 |
| Playboy of the Western World (The) | 287 |
| Pound on Demand | 217 |
| Present Laughter | 283 |
| Show Boat | 496 |
| Temper the Wind | 197 |
| Toplitzky of Notre Dame | 201 |
| What Every Woman Knows | 268 |
| Wonderful Journey | 214 |
| Years Ago | 229 |


### 1945 Vol.


| | |
|---|---|
| Carousel | 226 |
| Red Mill (The) | 141 |
| State of the Union | 102 |


### 1944 Vol.


| | |
|---|---|
| Anna Lucasta | 143 |
| *Harvey | 95 |


### 1943 Vol.


| | |
|---|---|
| *Oklahoma | 341 |
| *Voice of the Turtle (The) | 199 |


### 1940 Vol.


| | |
|---|---|
| Life With Father | 457 |


**Asterisks indicate shows scheduled to play week of November 24, 1947*

## 1947 PRODUCTIONS

Premieres During 1947

*Reviews Appear in This Volume*


| *Stage Play* | *Page* | *Stage Play* | *Page* |
|---|---|---|---|
| Alice in Wonderland | 398 | Laura | 353 |
| All My Sons | 475 | Little A | 483 |
| *Allegro | 300 | Louisiana Lady | 362 |
| As You Like It | 451 | Love for Love | 367 |
| Barefoot Boy With Cheek | 402 | Love Goes to Press | 497 |
| Bathsheba | 415 | Magic Touch (The) | 348 |
| Big Two (The) | 494 | *Man and Superman | 308 |
| *Brigadoon | 427 | *Medea | 295 |
| Chocolate Soldier (The) | 431 | Medium (The) | 379 |
| *Command Decision | 328 | Merchant of Venice (The) | 450 |
| Craig's Wife | 457 | Message for Margaret | 393 |
| Dear Judas | 315 | Miracle in the Mountains | 387 |
| *Druid Circle (The) | 288 | *Music In My Heart | 324 |
| Duet for Two Hands | 312 | Open House | 359 |
| Eagle Has Two Heads (The) | 421 | Our Lan' | 339 |
| *Eastward in Eden | 261 | Parlor Story | 436 |
| *Finian's Rainbow | 486 | Portrait in Black | 371 |
| *First Mrs. Fraser (The) | 267 | Story of Mary Surratt (The) | 461 |
| *For Love or Money | 271 | Street Scene | 490 |
| Hamlet | 447 | Sweethearts | 479 |
| Heads or Tails | 377 | Telephone (The) | 379 |
| *Heiress (The) | 335 | Tenting Tonight | 406 |
| *High Button Shoes | 304 | *This Time Tomorrow | 274 |
| *How I Wonder | 332 | Trial Honeymoon | 278 |
| I Gotta Get Out | 343 | Under the Counter | 320 |
| Importance of Being Earnest (The) | 439 | Volpone | 448 |
| *Inspector Calls (An) | 291 | *Winslow Boy (The) | 283 |
| It Takes Two | 469 | Whole World Over (The) | 411 |
| *John Loves Mary | 465 | Yellow Jack | 443 |
| King Lear | 453 | *Young Man's Fancy (A) | 383 |



| | |
|---|---|
| Critics' Circle Award | 392 |
| Pulitzer Award | 376 |


**Asterisks indicate shows scheduled to play week of November 24, 1947*

### THEATRE OPENINGS

"Eastward in Eden"

*Theatre Critics Reviews brings you each week the complete reviews as they originally appeared in these New York newspapers*

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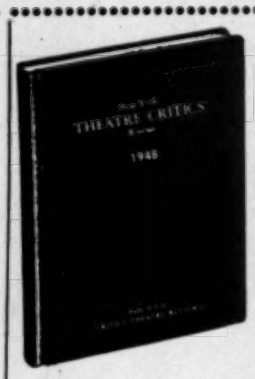


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# "Eastward in Eden"

The Sun

NOVEMBER 19, 1947

By WARD MOREHOUSE.

***Quiet Evening in Eden.***

The theater turned up last night with a new playwright in Dorothy Gardner and a new producer in Nancy Stern and they give us "Eastward in Eden," a tender, decorous and singularly unmoving play of the unrequited love of Emily Dickinson. The title is taken from the eighth verse, second chapter of Genesis.

"Eastward in Eden," put on at the Royale, is more literary than dramatic. It is a play of considerable dignity, projecting something of the feeling of "The Barretts of Wimpole Street," but it holds your interest only spasmodically. The evening's finest moments, the exalted moments, come with reading of fragments of the Dickinson poetry.

The time of "Eastward in Eden" is the 1850s; the locale is Amherst, Mass. The author shows the meeting of the youthful Emily, of stern Puritan upbringing, and a Philadelphia clergyman after she has descended upon him in his church study, disturbed by his sermon on immortality. Their attraction for each other is instantaneous. They exchange inspirational letters and he visits her in Amherst.

But the Rev. Dr. Wadsworth is married and is a father. Aware of her great love for him, he tells her that there must be a parting. He goes to California and she withdraws from life, giving herself to her poetry and to the solitude of her home. When she sees her minister again, twenty years later, he is old, shaken, sick, uncertain and he comes to her for her wisdom, understanding and humanity.

Beatrice Straight, asserting herself as an actress and capturing a positive iridescence in some of her scenes, is thoroughly believable as the strange, brilliant and tortured New England poet. Onslow Stevens plays the clergyman with dignity and restraint. Edwin Jerome is stern, irascible and perplexed as the head of the Amherst household. There are helpful performances from Ernest Graves, Beatrice Manley and John D. Seymour.

The play has been well produced, Donald Oenslager adorning it with exact, exquisite interiors, one being the Dickinson parlor in 1852 and the other a church study in Philadelphia. Ellen Van Volkenburg has supplied careful, detailed direction and there is some incidental music by Andre Singer.

"Eastward in Eden" has sensitivity, along with some warmth and tenderness, but it remains a sparse and straining play and it isn't, actually, a very interesting one.

**'EASTWARD IN EDEN.'**

Play by Dorothy Gardner; directed by Ellen Van Volkenburg; settings and costumes by Donald Oenslager; original music by Andre Singer; presented by Nancy Stern at the Royale Theater, Tuesday evening, November 18, 1947. The cast:

| | |
|---|---|
| Austin Dickinson | John O'Connor |
| Lavinia Dickinson | Beatrice Manley |
| Maggie | Kate Tomlinson |
| Lucy Flora | Barbara Amos |
| Helen Fiske (Hunt Jackson) | Emma Knox |
| Susan Gilbert | Penelope Sack |
| Gerry Hood | Don Peters |
| Ben Newton | Ernest Graves |
| Emily Dickinson | Beatrice Straight |
| Edward Dickinson | Edwin Jerome |
| Dr. Charles Wadsworth | Onslow Stevens |
| Miss Simpson | Mary Jackson |
| Martha Dickinson | Robin Humphrey |
| Thomas Wentworth Higginson | John D. Seymour |

SYNOPSIS: Act I. Scene 1: The Dickinson parlor, Amherst, evening, 1852. Scene 2: Pastor's church study, Philadelphia, 1854. Act II. Scene 1: Same as Scene 1, Act I. Summer afternoon, several years later. Scene 2: Same. December afternoon, a year later. Scene 3: Same. Three days later. Night. Act III. The Dickinson parlor, Amherst, Sunday afternoon. Twenty years later.

DAILY NEWS

NOVEMBER 19, 1947

# Beatrice Straight Is Superb as Emily Dickinson in a Lovely Play

By JOHN CHAPMAN

A lovely and delicate play, "Eastward in Eden," came last evening to the Royale Theatre, and in it a gifted young woman, Beatrice Straight, gave a performance which can be described with one word—beautiful.

Not often does today's theatre, which is matter-of-fact and not too noble in motive, offer a drama which strives to transport us into a world of tenderness and grace. Not often does a dramatist bent upon writing a biographical play succeed in presenting much more than obvious factual data and surface characteristics; few manage to reveal the spirit within.

The subject of Dorothy Gardner's fine work is the Nineteenth Century New England poet, Emily Dickinson, a mystical and puzzling creature who once wrote, "Some keep the Sabbath going to church; I keep it staying at home, with a bobolink for a chorister, and an orchard for a dome."

**A Performance of Passion.**

Mrs. Gardner has made this mystical and puzzling creature come alive, and Miss Straight plays her vibrantly, ecstatically and endearingly. Between author and player, Emily Dickinson emerges as much more than a strange recluse whose big house in Amherst was considered by neighborhood kids to be haunted. She becomes an intensely passionate woman, looking for heaven—and love—among the stars and the red sunsets and the flowers of her garden. Where there is love, she says, earth becomes a part of heaven.

I am about as ill-versed an authority on the biography and poetry of Emily Dickinson as could be found in a nation-wide manhunt. It may be that Mrs. Gardner's story of the young Amherst girl's love affair with a married minister of Philadelphia is a too prettily scented relation of known facts. All I know is that I was very much moved at the gentle unfolding of this romantic tale. Often, not very much was happening, in the ordinary sense of event and conflict; but I did not want anything to happen. I was content to listen.

**A Play of the Spirit.**

Once I felt that a dream scene, in which Emily imagines herself and her lover free and happy in eternity, could somehow be improved—but I knew I couldn't do it any better, and I knew it was dramatically necessary. For in the play Miss Dickinson's Dr. Wadsworth, a man of rectitude, forswears their love and goes out of her life—and for 20 years Emily's body confines itself to the house and garden while her spirit roams the eternity she has dreamed of.

Much of the telling of the play is in the poet's own words. Very often I felt that it was better than Rudolf Besier's story of another poetess in "The Barretts of Wimpole Street"—for Besier was concerned more with the earthly passion and elopement of Elizabeth Barrett and Robert Browning than he was with trying to capture that heaven-sent something which makes a poet.

Besier caught the flesh. Mrs. Gardner has caught the spirit—and so, to a greater degree, has the willowy and enchanting Miss Straight. An equally happy casting choice is Onslow Stevens as Dr. Wadsworth, a minister who also seeks truth and beauty. There are many other members of an excellent company, including Beatrice Manley as Emily's devoted sister, Edwin Jerome as her father and Don Peters as a luckless suitor.

The play has been sensitively directed by Ellen van Volkenburg and there are two fine settings by Donald Oenslager.

## Daily Mirror

NOVEMBER 19, 1947

# Eastward in Eden Headed 'West'

By ROBERT COLEMAN

One of these fine days Emily Dickinson, the Massachusetts mystic, is going to become more famous than her poetry. That is, if biographies, studies and plays about her keep pouring from the nation's typewriters.

The latest to tackle the problem of Emily is Dorothy Gardner. In "Eastward in Eden," she has Emily, the only member of her eccentric family not a church member, going to the handsome, eloquent Dr. Charles Wadsworth to learn the whys of life, death and immortality.

Emily imagines herself Eve and Dr. Wadsworth Adam in the Garden of Eden. She packs her bag, hoping that he will ask her to fly away from her stern, puritanical Amherst home with him. Of course the good Dr. has a wife and children, but that does not bother the romantic Emily.

However, it does bother the Dr., who flees west to California. Years later he returns to Amherst to see Emily. Now she is the one who has the answers. He is the uncertain petitioner for enlightenment.

"Eastward in Eden" is a sketchy play. It tosses big names around like matches spilled from a box, but never makes them come satisfyingly alive. Its major lion is Emerson, who might have been surprised to learn that he was not esteemed by lawyer Edwin Dickinson. Emerson, who never appears on stage, supplies almost as much of the dialogue as the feyish Emily.

"Eastward in Eden's" major asset is a charming performance by Beatrice Straight in the difficult role of Emily. Miss Straight is called upon to handle some pretty syruppy episodes. That there were no demands during the evening for bicarbonate, is a tribute to her powers of enchantment.

Miss Straight looms as the acting find of the current season. At intermission the lounge and lobby buzzed with queries as to where she has been hiding her gifts. But Miss Straight's talent has been obvious for a long time to those of us who saw her delightful Viola in "Twelfth Night."

Onslow Stevens is a sturdy, conscientious, sometimes impassioned Dr. Wadsworth. And there are capable contributions by Ernest Graves, Edwin Jerome, Don Peters, John O'Connor, Beatrice Manley and Penelope Sack.

Ellen Van Volkenburg's direction is of more help to Miss Straight than to Miss Gardner. Donald Oenslager is credited in very small type with having designed the authentic and pleasant New England living room for producer Nancy Stern.

"Eastward in Eden," despite Miss Straight's appealing acting, is likely to suffer the same fate as did the original Adam and Eve. It is likely to have short shrift in the theatrical Eden known as Broadway.

## The New York Times

NOVEMBER 19, 1947

### AT THE THEATRE

By BROOKS ATKINSON

Although the story of Emily Dickinson is fragmentary and elusive, Dorothy Gardner comes closer to recapturing it than the playwrights who have preceded her. In "Eastward In Eden," which was acted at the Royale last evening, she is writing the character portrait of a New England poet who sought refuge in mysticism. By laying emphasis on Emily's spiritual life, which was intense, and sometimes eloquent, Mrs. Gardner has written a period drama more perceptive than "Alison's House" and "Brittle Heaven," which were fascinated chiefly by the strange romance.

As a poet, Emily Dickinson may be overestimated. But "Eastward In Eden" leaves you convinced that her life was vivid, her tragedy terrible and her triumph immortal. The writing is more literary than theatrical, and Beatrice Straight's acting is more thoughtful than tremulous and inspired. But the shy, faltering scribbler of verses in an Amherst garden must have been much like the rare figure Mrs. Gardner is describing

* * *

She is assuming, as one of the legends has it, that Emily did fall in love with the Rev. Dr. Charles Wadsworth, a Philadelphia clergyman who was married; and that Wadsworth, obeying conscience rather than his impulse, fled with his family to California to escape a love that he returned. Mrs. Gardner tells this part of the story simply and naturally with a scene in Wadsworth's church study, when they meet and understand each other, and a scene in Amherst when their understanding hurries on toward rapture. After Wadsworth leaves the play, "Eastward In Eden" becomes a drama of the mind and soul, and includes one maudlin-dream scene that violates the high integrity of the tale of a reticent verse-maker.

Using some of Emily's own lines and phrases, Mrs. Gardner has been extraordinarily successful in communicating the agony of a girlish mind. She shows and motivates the transition from a impish young lady with an independent cast of thought to a shattered woman who constructs a bright new world out of wonder and religious mysticism. For Emily was a faint and timid echo of the transcendentalism that was sweeping New England in those speculative times. Being perceptive in her own right, Mrs. Gardner is able to make transcendentalism part of the normal speech, instead of a quaint fancy, and to show how transcendentalism gave spiritual richness to an austere civilization. In short, she explains Emily's gifts as a poet who occasionally caught a glimpse of immortality. By the time Mrs. Gardner is through drawing her portrait of a life, Emily emerges as no mystery but a logical character developed by experience in the world.

* * *

Great acting could make something marvellously vaulting and iridescent out of this character. It is brimming over with life finely observed and expressed. Miss Straight is a thoughtful, conscientious actress who appreciates the part and has put together an honest interpretation. But what she is able to contribute hardly touches the opportunities the part provides. It needs experienced, virtuoso acting by someone with the temperament to make Emily Dickinson's conquest of the fates one of glorious experiences in the theatre. It needs lightness, magic and passionate feeling.

The production as a whole is beautiful in a period of costumes and interiors that had a touch of grandeur, and Donald Oenslager has bestowed on it some of his loveliest workmanship. Under Ellen Van Volkenburg's sensitive direction, the performance is attractive. As the unhappy Philadelphia parson, Onslow Stevens is giving an admirable performance that conveys the sincerity, the fervor and the high principle of the character. As the elder Dickinson, Edwin Jerome is acting with authority and insight in a part that could easily become flatly tyrannical. As relatives and friends, John O'Connor, Beatrice Manley, Emma Knox, Barbara Ames, Don Peters and Ernest Graves are also giving good performances.

What "Eastward In Eden" requires is an inspired and inspiring performance in the part of Emily Dickinson. Anything less than that leaves Mrs. Gardner's character portrait an unfinished exercise in the theatre.

## New York Post

NOVEMBER 19, 1947

# An Intelligent Drama On Emily Dickinson

By RICHARD WATTS JR.

The strange, frustrated, walled-in life of Emily Dickinson, one of the greatest of American poets, is difficult and unpromising material for a playwright, and it cannot be said that Dorothy Gardner has conquered it in her play which opened at the Royale Theatre last night. "Eastward in Eden" is a sensitive and intelligent effort to give warm dramatic life to an interesting but stubbornly undramatic subject, and it is immeasurably aided by Beatrice Straight's beautiful performance and the tasteful production which Nancy Stern has provided for it. But it is unfortunately true that the story of this long-neglected New England genius refuses to be consistently interesting in the theatre.

Despite the resistance that poor Emily puts up to stage effectiveness, "Eastward in Eden" nevertheless manages to be properly alive for almost half of its course. Miss Gardner writes with grace and sympathy of her heroine's youthful gayety, her quiet opposition to puritan theology, and her meeting with the idealistic clergyman, Charles Wadsworth, whom she was to love with such mutual hopelessness. Up to the time the frustrated lovers realize that they must no longer see each other, the narrative maintains its quiet interest.

**Exile From Life**

The important part of her story, however, is not these external events, but Emily's self-imposed exile from life, her secret inner-existence, and the effect of the external events upon her lyric genius, and these things seem to fight off dramatization as grimly as Emily Dickinson fought off the world about her. Miss Gardner tries to present what is dramatically required in a scene of the girl's dream after her clergyman has left her, but

it is no more successful than the final episode of the minister's visit twenty years later.

In the less introspective part of the narrative, there is a sort of inescapable theatrical comparison with "The Barretts of Wimpole Street," with its puritanical family atmosphere, tyrannical father and romantic love between two literary figures. It is to the credit of "Eastward in Eden" that it never overemphasizes its Browning-like romance, but the playwright has a greater accomplishment than that. Thanks to her skill and to Miss Straight's sensitive setting, you feel that the central character is believable as a poet.

**Beatrice Straight**

Indeed, throughout the play, Miss Straight gives a touching, pictorialy striking and always credible portrayal of the odd and lonely girl of mid-nineteenth century Amherst, who happened to be an authentic American genius. Emily, of course, is the all-important figure of the drama, but the part of the clergyman, who might so easily have seemed unbearably priggish, is effectively managed by Onslow Stevens. Donald Oenslager's sets and costumes and Ellen Van Volkenburg's direction are helpful. Mrs. Stern has every reason to be pleased with her production.

Literary geniuses—in truth, literary figures who are far from geniuses—are difficult to portray in the theatre, and Emily Dickinson, whose life was chiefly internal, is especially hard to make theatrically interesting. Probably it would require as rare a talent in playwriting as that of Emily Dickinson in poetry. "Eastward in Eden" is a praiseworthy attempt to achieve a complex and subtle feat, even if it doesn't quite come off.

---

New York Herald Tribune

NOVEMBER 19, 1947

By OTIS L. GUERNSEY Jr.

***Heat Lightning***

A NINETEENTH century poetess's impassioned longing for truth and life is the subject for a philosophical and emotional conversation piece at the Royale. Dorothy Gardner's "Eastward in Eden" is a six-scene playscript attempting to explain how Emily Dickinson's spirit could expand into poetry despite the strictures of her narrow physical existence in Amherst, Mass. It makes the lightning flash in some of its fine talk about God, love and immortality, and in moments of Beatrice Straight's portrayal of the poetess, but it is only distant heat lightning. For the most part, it is merely a flamboyant description of unrequited love between a minister and a poetess in the frock coat and hoop skirt era.

Choosing samples from thirty years of Emily Dickinson's life, the play first sees her as a lithe, eager young creature certain that "her father's house in Amherst is Eden and that sooner or later an Adam will appear to match her Eve. She finds him in a pulpit, on a trip to Philadelphia, a married man with children. All the play's later selections from her life are occasions when the minister travels to call on her—to make friends, part forever, appear in her imagination, or finally, to reappear in solid form after an absence of twenty years. There is some little sadness in their relationship here, but it is overwhelmed in the script's perigrinating philosophies. The message, having something to do with the fact that love is immortality and that forever is now and not another time, is never quite clear, and it is posed in exposition rather than in terms of human beings caught in a drama.

Miss Straight's version of Emily Dickinson, a vivid young girl scattering winged thoughts like a wind-blown tree in autumn, is surprisingly captivating in a play which rarely has a strong grip on its audience. The inertia of the repetitive situation, as the minister calls and calls again, is somewhat overcome by her fresh, relaxed performance. She comes very near to making one believe in her as a mind which finds food for a whole rich existence in the tiny world of her Amherst home. Onslow Stevens, as the Philadelphia clergyman Dr. Charles Wadsworth, chisels away more directly and less deftly at the ponderous philosophies of the piece. He is a grim, black statue of a thinker who first explains and then doubts his own explanation, and one can never quite visualize him paired with the wild white butterfly.

Accompanying the central couple are Beatrice Manley in an angular portrait of a New England spinster sister, plus the usual number of family and friends who pass across the life of a sequestrated poetess in a college town. Ellen van Volkenburg's direction has let Miss Straight do pretty much as she pleases, including an occasional unwise move, and it is at a loss to make natural movements with Stevens in the many stage duets. Since "Eastward in Eden" is based on the life of a real character, and since Miss Gardner probably did considerable research before writing it, one must presume that a lot, if not all, of it actually happened. Unfortunately it does create a strong illusion of happening in its Royale version.

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Journal American

NOVEMBER 19, 1947

# A Fruitless Portrait Of Emily Dickinson

By ROBERT GARLAND

To make use of my critical predecessor's once celebrated gag, Dorothy Gardner is sure she knows who that man was they seen Emily Dickinson with in her poems. He was, according to last night's exposure at the Royale, the Rev. Dr. Charles Wadsworth, pastor of a dissenting chapel somewhere in Philadelphia.

In "Alison's House," Susan Glaspell whispered stagily that he was a Harvard professor. In "Brittle Heaven," Vincent York and Frederick Fohl insisted that he was an Army engineer. Now, in "Eastward in Eden," he reappears as a Pennsylvania clergyman. And, as always, he is good—and married!

So great is the Philadelphia preacher's love for the Calliope of Amherst in Massachusetts, that he packs up his pulpit and flees to distant California, taking his wife and children with him. And, for all of twenty years—they seem like more than twenty at the Royale—Emily stays at home to mope and mutter.

She mopes and mutters pictorially in the pretty parlor Donald Oenslager has designed especially for her moping and her muttering.

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## 3 Fruitless Tries

After three fruitless attempts to make a drama out of Emily Dickinson and the man they seen her with in her poems, there may still be a play in the life and works of the Amherst Calliope. If there is, Dorothy Gardner's "Eastward in Eden" is not that play. At the Royale, Emily never comes alive.

Nobody ever comes alive for that matter. These Dickinsons of College st. are merely the Barretts of Wimpole Street in American dress and without the Barrettonian believability. Emily, Austin, Lavinia, Edward, Martha and the other Dickinsons are cardboard figures on a real stage.

In her capacity as playwright, Miss Gardner pushes them around, ordering their comings and their goings in an effort to convince herself that the Rev. Charles Wadsworth is Emily Dickinson's mysterious admirer rather than a couple of other fellows such as a Harvard professor and an Army engineer.

In "Eastward in Eden" it doesn't seem to matter, just as it seemed not to matter in "Alison's House" and "Brittle Heaven."

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## Just Can't Understand

Beatrice Straight, an acting graduate of the schools of Fedor Dostoyevski, Maria Ouspenskaya, Tamara Daykahanova, Michael Chekhov and Ellen van Volkenburg, her present director, pretends to be Emily Dickinson. But, out of a book as well as in it, I can't begin to understand the Calhope from Amherst.

Onslow Stevens plays the Rev. Dr. Wadsworth with a confused simplicity that is winning and disarming. A good, well-meaning Pennsylvania pastor, I hope the frustrated New England poetess fails to get him in the end. But it looks tough for Charlie as the final curtain falls.

The others come on, go off, speak up and down as they are told, wearing Mr. Oenslager's becoming costumes with pride and perseverence . . . Under the producing banner of Nancy Stern, Dorothy Gardner's new version of the Emily Dickinson fable is neither a great deal better nor a great deal worse than the two that have gone before . . .

In "Eastward in Eden," or out of it, I don't much care about that man they saw Emily Dickinson with in her poems. But I'm sure he wasn't the Philadelphia parson at the Royale.